

Are you afraid of taking an online foreign language test?

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Abstract

Computer based testing has become a prevailing tendency in education. Each year, a large number of students take online language tests everywhere in the world. In fact, there is a tendency to make these tests more and more used due to their low cost of delivery. However, many students are forced to take them despite their interests, feelings and cognitive style. This paper describes a study with the fairly new APTIS Test (British Council). 35 students took the test and responded to a structured questionnaire on their feelings while taking it. Results indicate that the test brings a considerable amount of anxiety along with it.

Keywords: Testing; computers; foreign language; anxiety.

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1. Introduction

Online computer testing has become very common in recent times (Shuey, 2002; Garcia Laborda, 2007; Sapriati & Zuhairi, 2010; Nash, 2015). Educational boards and administrations see in online testing a flexible (Boyles, 2011), fast and efficient tool for educational measurement (Chang & Lu, 2011). Likewise, language tests have become a trending tendency in education due to the need to certify the candidate's knowledge for jobs, immigration and other purposes. Over the last five years, many online tests have been developed for such purposes such as IB TOEFL, BULATS, the Cambridge Suite (with their "for school" versions), GRE and more.

Despite of being native digitals, many students, however, do not feel at ease when taking online tests. There can be a number of reasons to be that way among which the kind of tasks is not minor. Language tests usually include reading, writing, listening, speaking and grammar tasks. Of these, all of them present limited problems but speaking represents a significant number of constraints (Nakatani, 2006):

- 1) Speaking is a negotiated activity. It requires two or more interlocutors.
- 2) Speaking is dynamic. Real life conversations are not structured and do not follow a pre-fixed order or pattern.
- 3) Speaking usually requires the election of the interlocutor even when it is forced by outside impositions (such as undesired working interviews).
- 4) Most conversations require common cultural and situational grounds and most times previous mutual knowledge.

Unfortunately, these conditions are hardly ever met in a face-to-face speaking task and they are totally absent in a computer test. Thus, strong feelings are likely to appear in students who take an oral exam. This lack of real communication which is forced by the testing situation usually leads to rejection and inconvenience.

2. Method

31 senior students of the college of teachers of the Universidad de Alcalá (Guadalajara, Spain) in 2013-2015 took an online questionnaire. These students were the first ones to take the test in that college and were said to do so just fifteen days in advance. At that time, the test format was totally unknown and there was no way to get any meaningful practice in advance.

The questionnaire was designed by the researchers and no formal design guidelines were used. The questionnaire included seven open questions which were originally written in English but finally answered in Spanish.

2.1. Research questions

The research intended to shed light in the following aspects:

- a) Why did the students perform so low if their actual competence was higher?
- b) What were the sources of anxiety or stress?

3. Results

The first main cause was the unusual experience of taking an online test. Most students (52%) considered that being the first time that they took an online test there were three main factors that affected their performance: unfamiliarity with the test itself, the awkwardness of speaking to a computer and the lack interaction.

Their responses showed that high anxiety was created also by other constraining factors such as lack of time, the use of a visual timer to measure their responses and the intrinsically difficulty of the tasks. About 50% of the students also recognized a high state of anxiety induced by these factors. A total of 23% of these students thought that their state of anxiety had an impact in their performance.

4. Analysis

The results indicate that a degree of unfamiliarity with the test can have an effect in the performance. However, this is not the only factor that can affect the result. Anxiety was also introduced by the use of computers for testing and this anxiety has certainly an effect on the students' performance. Students also need to have some training that only serves to train specifically for the test but also to get familiarized with the interface, navigability and delivery.

5. Conclusions

This primary research evidenced the need to deepen into the relation between different ways to communicate on computer based language tests. It is also necessary to see whether familiarity can lead to improvement. For instance, would a student repeating the same test perform any better? Would he feel at ease? And if that is the case, would it have an effect on the test scores?

Given the limited sample, future studies will have to increase the size of the sample and whenever possible include candidates with previous experience. Additional research would also be necessary to validate the test and even its construct and specifications.

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